

## The Aftermath

On Halloween, everything seems a little weird. You see a spider web and it's not clear whether it's real or a prop. You see a nun on the train and think it might just be a costume. You see girls loitering on the street only to find they're just waiting for the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. So perhaps that's why, when I logged into my bank account this morning and saw more digits in my balance than I've ever seen before, I didn't feel anything in particular.

"Yeah, it's there," I said, to no one in particular. We called everyone to make sure everything went through okay. Did I get it? Did you get it? Did we get that? Everything checked out. "Looks like we're all done here," went the email from the lawyers. After months of negotiations for this day, it had finally come. I almost felt sad seeing the lawyers say goodbye. Almost.

I sat reloading TechCrunch, then wrote a script to do it for me. Finally the notice appeared, elaborating as time went on. Then I posted it to my blog and others to theirs. It started seeming real. Finally, I dashed downstairs to an ATM machine and asked it to print a slip with my balance. "Would you like anything else?" it asked. "No," I said, and grabbed the slip. The numbers were big; the money was there. I started grinning and dashed back to the apartment.

But that excitement soon faded. Post after post, congratulation after congratulation, insult after insult. Friends emailed and called to share goodwishes. Reporters called to talk to Alexis and Steve. ("No, that's A-L-E-X-I-S. Yes. Yes. Well, uh, it's a news site.") Users emailed to send congratulations. "How do you feel?" everyone asked. I didn't know. How was I supposed to feel?

TechCrunch called to do a podcast, asked us to tell the listeners the story of how we got to this day. And it wasn't that anything said was particularly wrong, strictly speaking, but I walked away thinking we'd given the wrong impression. Companies getting bought makes you think of lawyers in suits at conference tables signing papers. And while there were lawyers and suits and conference tables and papers to sign (oh, plenty of papers to sign), it wasn't really like that. It was more just a couple guys in a apartment typing on computers and talking on the phone.

I remember how when reddit started, the whole thing seemed so childish. The cartoony alien, the barebones design, the fresh-faced programmers, the rented house. And none of that has really changed. It's just that with success behind it, it's harder to dismiss. A scribbled drawing a kid hands to you is "cute", the same thing on the wall of a museum is "art". You assume there must be something there, even if you can't see it.

It's hard to notice this when you're in the middle of it. During the days, I mostly saw my co-workers, who lived and breathed the site. At night, I hung out with my friends, who all knew what I did. On weekends, we'd go to parties for local startups, who all wanted to emulate reddit's success. Everyone we talked to treated us like it was serious.

But whenever I stepped outside the bubble, things were very different. At non-tech parties, I'd have trouble explaining what it was I did. ("So you, uh, have a web site?") Once I went far outside the city to have lunch with an author I respected. He asked about what I did, wanted me to explain it in great detail. He asked how many visitors we had. I told him and he sputtered. "I've spent fifteen years building an audience, and you're telling me in a year you have a million visitors?" I assented.

Puzzled, he insisted I show him the site on his own computer, but he found it was just as simple as I described. (Simpler, even.) "So it's just a list of links?" he said. "And you don't even write them yourselves?" I nodded. "But there's nothing to it!" he insisted. "Why is it so popular?"

Inside the bubble, nobody asks this inconvenient question. We just mumble things like "democratic news" or "social bookmarking" and everybody just assumes it all makes sense. But looking at this guy, I realized I had no actual justification. It was just a list of links. And we didn't even write them ourselves.

But that's not something you can say on TechCrunch. You can say a site is cool, stupid, popular, a flop, innovative, or cliché. But the one thing you can't say, the one thing that everybody skips over, is that these sites aren't anything serious. And so when Michael Arrington told us that these stories of acquisition were his favorite part of the "entrepreneurial spirit", I couldn't help but think that somebody was missing the point.

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